

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 72.

READER'S DIGEST
April 1986

For some years, Western intelligence agencies have been piecing together evidence of a clandestine Soviet military force, a large, covert army, brutally trained and poised to spearhead an invasion of Western Europe—or beyond. Here, in a comprehensive report, are the shocking facts compiled for Reader's Digest by syndicated columnist Dale Van Atta.



SPETSNAZ: The Soviets' Sinister Strike Force

A military bus pulls up to a U.S. Army training center in West Germany. Assuming it is filled with GIs coming back from town, sentries approach the bus routinely, only to be cut down by bursts of fire from weapons with silencers. The bus roars into the base as the two commando teams on board don gas masks.

Inside the facility, Americans, whose duty is to guard Pershing II nuclear-missile launchers, die within minutes beneath an invisible blanket of nerve gas, and the launchers are rendered useless.

A second Pershing base in Heilbronn falls in similar fashion. At the same time, five key NATO communications facilities—in Maastricht, the Netherlands, and in the German towns of Boerfink, Kindsbach, Massweiler and Vogelweh—are knocked out. Confusion reigns at the NATO high command in Brussels. Top officers and political leaders are missing. Some are found dead in their homes.

Meanwhile, frogmen emerge from the chilly waters near Keflavik, Iceland, a vital link in NATO's anti-submarine operations. Using equipment deposited on the sea bed months earlier, they immobilize reconnaissance and communications facilities.

No allied—or even neutral—country is immune. In Stockholm, Sweden, a machine-gun battle near the palace ends with the abduction of the royal family by frogmen, who had lain in wait until signaled by agents in the capital.

The best Soviet commandos, with the help of long-established covert

agents, have suddenly brought the NATO alliance to an excruciating crisis. With its tactical nuclear capability, its communications and its leadership crippled in one stroke, what will the West do to prevent a Soviet invasion of Western Europe?

ALTHOUGH THESE EVENTS are hypothetical, planning for them is real. Gen. Pyotr Ivanovich Ivashutin, the balding, bull-necked commander of Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye (GRU), the intelligence arm of the Soviet military, has at his disposal a force of 30,000 men and women trained to carry out these tasks.

Western intelligence services have been slow to learn of the existence and makeup of these commando groups, which are already credited with such operations as the 1979 assassination of the president of Afghanistan and the suppression of anti-Soviet activities in Bulgaria in the mid-1960s. But now their threat is known, as is the group's real name: Spetsnaz, from *spetsalnaya naznacheniya*, meaning special-purpose forces.

"The development of Spetsnaz is a particularly menacing aspect of the growth of Soviet military power," says U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Noel Koch. "Their job is to destroy a nation's infrastructure and kill people. They are an integral part of Soviet peacetime operations, and in wartime could pose a grave

threat of strategic disruption in the NATO area—and in the United States itself."

Scouting for Sabotage. A typical Spetsnaz unit has a senior and a junior officer, a communications man, a medic, and at least two demolition and four reconnaissance specialists. Commonly used equipment includes surface-to-air missiles, "burst" communications transmitters (which send a short "squirrel" of encrypted signals by satellite back to headquarters), and a list of targets, which may be attacked or merely watched. A Spetsnaz brigade, made up of 100 of these teams, includes ten career-officer units, the elite of the elite, whose primary mission is assassination of enemy leaders. Altogether, U.S. intelligence reckons that Spetsnaz's total wartime strength includes 20 brigades, each with 900 to 1,200 men, plus at least four naval brigades.

Selection to a Spetsnaz unit is a high honor. "Only recruits who pass rigorous tests are accepted," says a GRU defector who lives in England under the pseudonym Viktor Suvorov. He maintains (and intelligence sources concur) that many of the Soviet Union's best athletes, particularly members of its Olympic team, are Spetsnaz commandos. International sporting events give them the double advantage of honing skills in marksmanship, skiing and swimming, while familiarizing themselves with the countries to which they might return someday as saboteurs.

Spetsnaz officers and men enjoy higher pay, better food, longer leaves, quicker promotion and earlier retirement than regular army personnel do. But they earn their perks. In survival exercises they are dropped over wilderness areas and then required to spend days or weeks on their own—without sleeping bags.

But on a typical mission, each Spetsnaz member carries the Kalashnikov light automatic rifle with 300 rounds of ammunition and a bayonet that doubles as a saw and wire cutter, a P6 pistol with silencer, six hand grenades or a hand-grenade launcher, and a James Bondish knife that, at the touch of a button, silently propels a lethal blade a full

30 feet.

Sheer brutality marks Spetsnaz methods. One of their main training centers—at Zheltyye Vody in the Ukraine—is close to concentration camps. According to Suvorov, gulag inmates are used in hand-to-hand combat training, allowing Spetsnaz troops to punch, gouge, kick and maim at will. "It's much more realistic than sticking a knife in a sack of sand," he says.

Infiltrate, Assassinate. Intelligence reports on a secret Spetsnaz training base west of the Urals prove that they train against U.S. and NATO targets. There are full-size mockups of civilian airliners (for hijack training), American and French jet fighters, nuclear-missile launchers, Pershing and ground-launched cruise missiles. Ironically, the first Pershing II "missile" deployed in Europe was not in West Germany in 1983, but at an earlier date in the Soviet Union as a model at the training center.

In an actual conflict, Spetsnaz teams would infiltrate Western Europe and the United States during a period of international tension—but before the U.S.S.R. declared war. Besides clandestine airdrops, frogmen and mini-sub landings, there would be a higher-than-normal number of sports and cultural delegations entering the targeted countries.

The staffs of Soviet embassies and consulates would be augmented by unusually fit young men and women acting as guards, chauffeurs and gardeners. These teams would activate networks of "sleepers" agents, who already live near bases, arsenals and communications centers. They keep watch, provide information and maintain safe houses where Spetsnaz teams could hide.

In the event of a sneak attack, the teams would target or attack nuclear-weapons facilities; destroy command-control systems and neutralize military bases; disrupt public-power and broadcasting stations; and assassinate political and military leaders.

Assassination is key to Soviet blitzkrieg planning. Since NATO's nuclear weapons can be unleashed only by political leaders, eliminating them would delay the decision

to retaliate with nuclear arms. C. N. Donnelly, head of the Soviet Studies Research Centre at Britain's Royal Military Academy, says, "It is the total political collapse of key NATO governments that the U.S.S.R. must seek to accomplish in as short a time as possible."

This audacious strategy takes advantage of NATO's unwieldy structure. Alliance procedures require consultation among its 16 member countries in the event of hostilities, and it takes a few days to mobilize NATO's forward defense. Trucks have to line up at storage sites in Western Europe, for example, to load nuclear warheads, then take them to their units along public roads, making ideal targets for Spetsnaz ambush teams. As Britain's Ministry of Defence warned in 1984, "the main threat is not large-scale invasion but sabotage by squads of specially trained troops."

Mysterious Submarines. According to U.S. intelligence, Spetsnaz troops have been at work for years. In Special Operations in U.S. Strategy. Defense Intelligence Agency expert John Dziak writes: "In Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet seizure of the Prague airport was carried out by Spetsnaz troops under KGB orders. These units arrested party leader Aleksandr Dubcek and dispatched him to Moscow. Similar missions were carried out against other 'enemies' on KGB lists."

The Christmastime invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a classic Spetsnaz operation. Key Afghan-army officers were lured to a reception in honor of "Afghan-Soviet friendship." As the officers celebrated, they were locked in the hall and blown up by a Spetsnaz unit.

But according to KGB defector Maj. Vladimir Kuzichkin, the primary objective of the several hundred Spetsnaz men flown into Kabul was the assassination of President Hafizullah Amin. On December 27, Spetsnaz forces wearing Afghan uniforms and under KGB command approached the Darulaman Palace from three sides, fought their way to Amin, and killed him, his family and guards.

Western intelligence, which depends heavily on radio intercepts, refugee and defector reports, indicates that the greatest Spetsnaz involvement today is in Afghanistan,

where they are helping 120,000 Red Army troops fight guerrillas. "While costly, Afghanistan is considered by the Soviet military to be the first real operational laboratory for their armed forces since World War II," Dziak reports.

"Spetsnaz forces have influence well beyond the Soviet Union because their unconventional warfare tactics make them an excellent tool for exporting revolution," says U.S. Secretary of the Army John Marsh. Not only Afghan, but Cuban and other Third World troops have been to Spetsnaz training camps in the U.S.S.R.

Units of Spetsnaz are deployed regularly to probe the intelligence and military reflexes of the West. A favorite tool is a mini-submarine, able to crawl on the sea bed with tanklike tracks. Spetsnaz mini-subspies on Swedish naval bases and look for potential landing beaches for assault swimmers. They have crept underwater to within a mile of Stockholm's Royal Palace. In March 1984 the Swedish army, using machine guns and hand grenades, repulsed Spetsnaz frogmen near a large navy base. More recently, these subs have been reported off the Strait of Gibraltar, the choke point between the Atlantic and Mediterranean, and have left tracks on the ocean bottom near Japanese naval bases.

Contemplating the Kremlin's bold use of Spetsnaz, Edward Luttwak, a top military analyst at The Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, comments, "It's yet another sign that the Soviet Union is seriously planning its offensives."

Our Western allies have begun to cope with the ugly reality of Spetsnaz. For example, Britain is strengthening its Territorial Army and has established a Home Service Force for defense and to improve its guard systems for vital installations. And with good reason. *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported last January: "The Soviet Union has maintained a secret detachment of female Spetsnaz forces near Greenham Common Air Base since the deployment of U.S. Air Force land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles there in December 1983. Soviet defectors have disclosed that several

trained agents infiltrated women's protest groups at Greenham Common and were present 'at all times.'"

The Pentagon believes a multi-layered response is necessary to foil Spetsnaz. Those groups, including leading public officials threatened by such a strike force, should be made aware of its capabilities. Agencies such as the FBI and Border Patrol, which would detect and respond to an attack by Spetsnaz forces, must know what to look for and be prepared to react. Finally, our intelligence-gathering on Spetsnaz—learning how, when and where they will strike—must be beefed up.

"The development of Spetsnaz has been rapid, and we are only now recognizing the magnitude of the threat they pose," concludes the Pentagon's Koch. "We must vastly improve our rear-area security to deal with that threat."